**School violence and its antecedents: interviews with high school students**

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Students whose parents subject them to punitive discipline at home are much more likely to have attacked someone at school than students whose parents are not punitive toward their children.

Violence on school grounds is also more likely to occur in schools where more than 25 per cent of the teachers have less than five years experience.

These are two of the key findings to emerge from a study on the risk factors associated with school violence released today by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

The study was commissioned by the NSW Department of Education and Training following the forum on school safety convened by the NSW Government in April 2002.

It is the largest of its kind ever undertaken in Australia. Structured interviews were held with 2,616 year 8 and year 9 students attending NSW secondary schools and a further 41 in-depth interviews were held with students who had been disciplined for assault on school grounds.

The findings contradict the popular assumption that the causes of school violence all lie within the school environment. According to the Bureau, personal and family factors play a key role in shaping the risk of violence on school grounds. Students are more likely to have attacked someone if:

* They are male
* They live with only one parent or not with their parents at all
* Their mother is 35 or younger
* Their parent(s) employ(s) punitive disciplinary practices
* Their parent(s) poorly supervise them
* They have problems with their family
* They have problems reading and/or writing
* They are impulsive

School factors, however, also play an important role. Students are more likely to have attacked someone if, in their opinion:

* They spend a lot of time copying out work from textbooks
* Their teachers spend more time keeping control of the class than teaching
* The students at their school are racist
* Kids who make racist remarks at the school don’t get into trouble with the teachers
* Teachers do not intervene to stop bullying when they know about it
* They were never formally told the school rules

Qualitative interviews with students involved in incidents of violence confirm the importance of both family and school in the prevention of school violence.

These in-depth interviews revealed that several of the students who had been disciplined for violent behaviour came from families where violence was condoned and, in one or two cases, encouraged.

They also revealed that intervention by school authorities is consistently effective in stopping fights once they have started. Some of the students who got involved in fights, however, either failed to seek help from the school to resolve their grievances or believed that the school had not responded adequately to those grievances.

Commenting on the findings, the director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn said that they highlighted the need for parents and schools to work together to reduce the risk of violence on school grounds.

“The present study confirms previous research in showing that schools can reduce the risk of violence by establishing a firm but fair disciplinary policy that is clearly communicated to the student population”.

“They can also reduce the risk of school violence by intervening early to stop racist behaviour and school bullying”.

“Parents, however, can also reduce the risk of school violence if they do not condone violent behaviour at home and avoid disciplining their children in ways that are harsh, erratic and inconsistent”.

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